DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 514 CE 073 913

| | |
|---|---|
| TITLE | Contextual Learning. Resource Bulletin. |
| INSTITUTION | National School-to-Work Opportunities Office, Washington, DC. |
| PUB DATE | Apr 96 |
| NOTE | 4p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | National School-to-Work Office, 400 Virginia Avenue, S.W., Room 210, Washington, DC 20024; 800-251-7236; fax: 202-401-6211; World Wide Web: http://www.stw.ed.gov. |
| PUB TYPE | Information Analyses (070) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Cooperative Programs; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Resources; Educational Strategies; *Experiential Learning; High Schools; Job Training; Labor Force Development; Program Development; Program Implementation; *School Business Relationship; Vocational Education; *Work Experience Programs; Youth Opportunities; Youth Programs |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Contextualized Learning Environments; *Situated Learning |

ABSTRACT

Contextual learning--also known as "learning by doing, experiential learning, real-world education, or active learning"--has long been advocated for students. In practice, however, schools often offer the opposite: individual learning, independent of tools, dependent upon symbols, and theoretical. Today the school-to-work movement has become one of the strongest proponents of learning situated in settings that require students to interact directly with real experiences. Simply placing a student in a "real-world" context does not guarantee a learning experience, however. Effective contextual learning results from a complex interaction of teaching methods, content, situation, and timing. For programs to work, far-reaching changes must be made in the following areas: (1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) linkages to workplaces, community organizations, and other contexts; (3) staff development for teachers and employers; (4) school organization; (5) communication; and (6) time for planning and development. The Rindge School of Technical Arts in Massachusetts has developed effective practice in developing community partnerships that have resulted in workplace experiences for students. (KC)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 407 514

SCHOOL TO WORK OPPORTUNITIES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

★RESOURCE BULLETIN

APRIL 1996

# Contextual Learning

The application of contextual learning to American classrooms was first proposed by John Dewey, who advocated a curriculum and teaching methodology tied to the child's experiences and interests, and who deplored the separation of education into mind and body, and of school programs into academic and occupational tracks. Today the school-to-work movement has become one of the strongest voices raised in support of learning situated in settings that require students to interact directly with real experiences.

Learning-in-context is so obvious a notion that the average person might tend to dismiss its importance. Anyone who has ever endured the first day in a new job or played a pickup game of basketball has experienced contextual learning: that fruitful, if often frustrating, confrontation between a human mind's knowledge and skills and a new set of cognitive, social, physical, or mechanical demands. Contextual learning is learning that occurs *in close relationship* with actual experience. People have used such terms as experiential learning, real-world education, active learning, and learner-centered instruction to mean similar ideas.

Lauren Resnick offered a cogent summary of the contrasts between contextual learning and traditional education in her 1987 presidential address to the American Educational Research Association: social vs. individual learning, learning shaped by tools vs. learning independent of tools, learning engaged with objects vs. learning dependent upon symbols, and learning that is situation-specific vs. theoretical learning. Cognitive research, in expanding our understanding of how people learn, continues to demonstrate that schools, as traditionally organized, violate all that we understand about how people learn and apply what they learn to new situations.

Various strands of research contribute to the contextual learning synthesis. One important strand is the research on adult literacy, which finds that literacy education should build on experiences and contexts--such as the workplace--familiar to adults. Ethnographic studies of people performing their jobs have led some researchers to advocate for work preparation that recognizes the social aspects of work and the need students have to experience and reflect on what is happening in order to learn. Other cognitive psychologists have argued that schools are not teaching the thinking skills most required in high performance workplaces, and they look to contextual learning approaches as a remedy. Derived from this line of research, the concept of the cognitive apprenticeship adapts the traditional apprenticeship model for acquiring physical skills to the acquisition of cognitive skills.

The common sense aspects of contextual learning leave the concept at risk of careless implementation. Simply placing a student in a "real-world" context does not guarantee a learning

CE073913

2 BEST COPY AVAILABLE



National School-to-Work Office ★ 400 Virginia Ave., SW, Rm. 210, Washington, DC 20024 ★ 1-800-251-7236, fax 202-401-6211

experience. Effective contextual learning results from a complex interaction of teaching methods, content, situation, and timing. For school, community, and workplace partners, contextual learning means agreeing to a shared vision of a contextual learning program's goals, whom it should serve, and what strategies it should use to achieve its goals. For educators, adopting contextual learning requires time-consuming and far-reaching changes in practice related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, linkages with workplaces and other contexts, staff development, school organization, and communication.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**. Contextual learning requires rethinking of three areas: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Traditional disciplines must be adapted to teach material in meaningful contexts; artificial distinctions between occupational and academic studies should be eliminated; new teaching strategies should be created once the teacher is no longer the dispenser of wisdom and the textbook is not the basis for lesson plans; and new assessments must be developed to inform instruction and to help students, teachers, and parents better understand how students learn once rote learning and textbook mastery are abandoned.

**Linkages to Workplaces, Community Organizations, and other Contexts**. Students need hands-on experiences in which they learn about and participate in workplaces. These experiences may involve extended periods in paid work but may also be unpaid internships in community organizations, or they may involve other contexts such as museums that provide learning opportunities outside the classroom. The experiences must be carefully structured through in-class preparation; coordination with supervisors in workplaces or other settings; and careful sequencing of learning experiences in which increasing levels of complexity are introduced and students have opportunities to experience many aspects of workplaces. To accomplish this, workplace or community experiences must be documented, assessed, and linked to classroom instruction through opportunities for reflection.

**Staff Development for Teachers and Employers**. Staff development for teachers and for employers working with schools is critical before implementing a contextual learning program on an ongoing basis. It should provide teachers with opportunities to learn about the nature of the workplaces for which students are being prepared. Employers need to understand how to structure employment in ways that provide a range of learning experiences and responsibilities. They also need opportunities to communicate with teachers and to contribute to the development of curricula. In addition, plans for assessing workplace or community experiences must be developed.

**School Organization**. School organization in high schools typically supports a traditional "shopping mall" curriculum, most often divided into forty-five minute periods. Teachers usually teach within their disciplines, behind closed doors in isolated classrooms. Contextual learning requires a complete reorganization of the schedule; rethinking of curriculum and instruction; and opportunities for teachers to plan programs, observe work settings, learn in workplaces, and collaborate with employers and businesses and other organizations where students will be placed for internships or paid work. Administrative support must be provided to teachers to carry out the difficult tasks of rethinking curriculum and instruction, as well as planning and collaborating.

**Communication**. Successful contextual learning requires ongoing communication among all relevant players--teachers, employers, or other out-of-school supervisors or mentors, as well as among students and parents. Parents should be invited into classrooms to learn about and experience new forms



National School-to-Work Office ★ 400 Virginia Ave., SW, Rm. 210, Washington, DC 20024 ★ 1-800-251-7236, fax 202-401-6211

of teaching, to become informed about program goals and outcomes and their child's progress, and to be encouraged to contribute to system planning and development. Similarly, student feedback on the effectiveness of programs is an essential component of system assessment and refinement.

**Time**. All innovations require time--time to plan, to collaborate, to learn new approaches, and to reflect on what is accomplished. They also require time to develop effective implementation strategies. School change theorists argue that successful school change may require three to five years. Without allowing for this learning curve among practitioners, contextual learning could be implemented in ways that adapt to and reinforce current practice rather than change it.

## Effective Practice

The **Rindge School of Technical Arts (RSTA)** in Massachusetts is one of seven "houses" that make up the campus of Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. RSTA has embarked on partnerships with university faculty, business, and community partnerships that have resulted in workplace experiences for students. Eleventh-grade and twelfth-grade students work with Polaroid employees in areas such as instrumentation, electronics, and plumbing for two-and-one-half-hour shifts for which they earn wages. Students also write weekly summaries of their work and make presentations to Polaroid staff. To prepare for teaching careers, other students enter an internship program with Lesley College, spending three mornings a week at the college, two mornings in elementary schools, and the rest of the day at RSTA taking classes. For more information, contact: Rindge School of Technical Arts, Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, 459 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138 ★ (617) 349-6752.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOPIC, CONSULT THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS:**

## Publications


Berryman, S. E., and T. R. Bailey. *The Double Helix of Education and the Economy*. New York: Columbia University, The Institute of Education and The Economy, 1992.

Collins, A., J. S. Brown, and A. Holum. "Cognitive Apprenticeship: Making Thinking Visible." *American Educator* (1991): 6ff.

Goldberger, S., R. Kazis, and M. K. O'Flanagan. *Learning Through Work: Designing and Implementing Quality Worksite Learning for High School Students*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1994.

Grubb, W. N., G. Davis, J. Lum, J. Plihal, and C. Morgaine. *The Cunning Hand, The Cultured Mind: Models for Integrating Vocational and Academic Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California at Berkeley, National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1991.

Resnick, L. B. "Presidential Address: Learning In School and Out." *Educational Researcher* (1987).

Weinbaum, A., and A. M. Rogers. *Contextual Learning: A Critical Aspect of School-to-Work Transition Programs*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, 1995.